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## 'A fair curve from a noble plan': *Certain Women*

### I.

Shortly before the midpoint of Kelly Reichardt's 2016 film *Certain Women* there is an expression on an actor's face, an expression that is held – by actor and camera – for about two seconds; just long enough to be more than momentary (not all moments, I think, are simply momentary). I am attracted and intrigued by this expression and by this moment. The image on this page is one frame from, or of, that moment (a moment excerpted from a moment):

I feel as if I know exactly what it feels like to give someone such a look, although I have no idea if I look like Michelle Williams in doing so. Presumably I do at least a little bit, or the expression wouldn't be legible, which is to say that we can understand facial expressions 'from the outside' only because we can comprehend something of how they would feel 'from the inside'. When watching this moment, as part of this sequence, I connect more closely to my feeling of 'expressing such an expression' than to my memories of having had such glances shot my way (though these moments, too, must also play into my experience of the glance). This, perhaps, explains something of the pleasure that seeing this expression gives me; if I felt myself more clearly the object of the gaze then it would be a much more awkward and, perhaps, a less pleasurable



experience. It might be possible to stop there: this moment is interesting and pleasurable because an actor skilfully evokes a familiar emotion (namely, irritation and anger at a loved one putting their foot in it). The pleasure comes from some combination of recognition and distance: the emotion is familiar (I have felt it), but I am not feeling it now (and thus in enjoying this expression I am able, to an extent, to laugh at myself).

What I have said so far has barely made reference to the narrative context in which this moment takes place, nor even to the character's name. For some scholars, this is to be expected, because – in reaction against more traditional aesthetic notions of the relationship between parts and wholes – it is characteristic of a distinctly cinephilic form of appreciation that the pleasure of a moment does *not* derive from its connection to the wider work. Rashna Wadia Richards, for example, suggests in her book *Cinematic Flashes* that there is something of a zero-sum game between investment in a film's narrative, or absorption in its diegesis, and the specific

attractions of unusual moments. She writes that 'cinephilic moments may be regarded as moments of cinematic excess, insofar as they surpass their diegetic requirements', which is to say that such moments 'offer tiny glimpses of points where the coherent system of representation breaks down' (2013: 24). Comparably, albeit in less forceful language, Tom Gunning argues that 'if we dwell on the sense of a *moment* in its singularity, it seems less to evoke the momentum of a plot than something that falls outside the story and its pace' (2010: 5). I have no wish to deny the interest of such moments, or of thinking about moments in this way, and my intentions align in a way with Richards' in that I am not interested in 'moments that are designed to be unforgettable' (24); the moment with which I began is, instead, something smaller and quieter that nonetheless has the potential of grabbing and arresting the attention. I do, however, wish to argue that such moments need not undermine 'the coherent system of representation', or thrive in its gaps or fissures, but can instead derive strength

and intensity from narrative and diegesis, as well as intensifying them (and our involvement in them) in return. In his book *Cinephilia and History, or The Wind in the Trees*, Christian Keathley makes the suggestion that 'if the cinephiliac moment is among the most intense of cinematic experiences, it seems to draw its intensity partly from the fact that it cannot be reduced or tamed by interpretation' (Keathley 2006: 9). The thrust of this passage might seem to be similar to Richards' argument, and to be that the cinephiliac moment somehow escapes or eludes interpretation, that it represents an excess for which any system – or pattern – can only be inadequate. I want to suggest that we might also, however, read Keathley's remark not as implying that interpretation is hamstrung – or outrun – by such moments, but that they can serve as opportunities for demonstrating that 'reduction' or 'taming' need not (indeed *should* not) be the aim of interpretation.

My own aims are perhaps a little closer to those expressed by George Toles when he writes, in an article entitled 'Rescuing Fragments: A New Task for Cinephilia', that he is not suggesting that the stray luminous passages in otherwise disposable or broken narratives ought to be scavenged catch-as-catch-can with no regard for the film worlds which engendered them. [...]. The fragments warrant being respectfully placed and considered within their narrative context; it is, after all, the *felt* combination of a given moment with its surrounding circumstances that allows it to 'lift off' emotionally. (2010: 161)

Rather than pursuing Toles' focus on the ways in which 'the brief passages that rise above the rest are also, arguably, in communion with each other, sharing a higher pitch of awareness and a secret network of correspondences' (161), however, I am particularly interested in how moments such as this form part of a wider whole – in their relations to what surrounds them, rather than with other 'special' moments – and specifically in how they contribute not only to our experience of the plans or schemes of the characters represented in them but also to what we might call the schemes of the films of which they are a part (which is to say the aesthetic, ethical, and other matters towards which they are directed).<sup>1</sup> We need not think in terms of a zero-sum game between character and form, in which a film that focusses on character must do so

at the expense of its formal structure, and vice versa; instead, moments such as Gina's glare might prompt us to consider the ways form can express character, or how character can shape form. Another way of putting this might be to say that form does not *contain* action so much as it *consists of action*. If characters *are*, ultimately, what they *do*, this suggests that revisions of some common assumptions about the relationship between character and form are in order.

This article is, then, concerned both with a critical discussion of certain aspects of *Certain Women*, focusing on and radiating out from a single moment, and with the place of this moment in relation to the expressive patterns that inform it and to which it contributes. What, then, is the place of the moment in question? The segment of the film from which it is drawn is the second of the three lightly intersecting stories that make up *Certain Women*. Michelle Williams plays Gina, a businesswoman, wife, and mother, who plans to build a house in the Montana countryside for herself and her family,

although, as she says, they 'can't really move out here full time, at least not until our daughter gets through high school'. She is sitting in the front room of a bungalow belonging to an elderly man named Albert (René Auberjonois) from whom, as part of her plan for the house, Gina wants to buy some 'authentic' sandstone that he has in his front yard. The dirty look that she is shooting is directed at her husband, Ryan (James Le Gros). Although Albert has agreed to give the sandstone to them, Ryan has just told him that he doesn't have to sell the stone if he doesn't want to, thus threatening what had seemed to be the successful achievement of this part of Gina's plan.

*Certain Women* is based on some works of literature, specifically on three short stories by Maile Meloy, which Reichardt adapted herself. The corresponding moment in 'Native Sandstone', the story on which this segment of *Certain Women* is based, both does and does not match its counterpart in the film. The dialogue preceding Gina's glance is almost identical, apart from changes to the characters' names: "You





don't have to sell it if you don't want to," Clay said. "Susan wants a house that's *authentic*." (Meloy 2005: 36). In the film, Ryan says: 'You don't have to sell it if you don't want to, it's just that Gina wants this new house to be *authentic*.' The sentence in the short story that directly follows, and that corresponds to the moment under discussion, however, is: 'He grinned at her and she frowned.' (36)



Ryan certainly does grin – and not just smile – at Gina:

Ryan's raised eyebrows, furrowed forehead, widened eyes, and toothy grin all take his expression to the edge of the ridiculous, overstating his evident desire – and obvious invitation – for Gina to agree with him. I think we are to understand that by offering Albert the chance to back out, Ryan hopes in fact to convince him that he is not being railroaded into parting with the sandstone; the risk that Albert will indeed withdraw his offer is a calculated risk, on Ryan's part, intended to make this outcome less likely.<sup>2</sup> Gina, however, is furious at the prospect that what she thought to be in her grasp might now, owing to her husband's actions, slip through her fingers. We might also note that their differing strategies and reactions contribute to the sense that the stone means more to Gina than to Ryan. This fact is not simply something he accepts; he subtly deflects responsibility onto her: 'Gina wants this new house to be authentic'. It is also important to remember that the opening scene of the film shows us that Ryan is having an affair with Laura Dern's character, a lawyer also called Laura, and that he has, in a rather cowardly fashion, recently attempted to break off, or at least pause, their relationship. (Laura receives a phone call in which he says, evidently disappointed, that he

was expecting her voicemail, and that, 'well, it's just my situation being what it is, I just think, maybe ...') So we might expect Ryan to go out of his way to help Gina achieve her goals, yet he cannot bring himself fully to acknowledge those goals as also his goals, perhaps because he is all too aware that for him they are merely instrumental, a means of rescuing his marriage. What exactly lies behind Gina's desire for the stone is, I think, rather more opaque, or at least difficult to pin down; later I will suggest that one reason for this is that her reasons are not entirely clear to herself.

It is, anyway, crucial to the effect of the film, and to what makes this moment memorable, that Gina does *not* frown, as Susan does in the story. Or that she somehow frowns without frowning, by freezing her face and intensifying her gaze – the muscles around her eyes and mouth tauten, without (in direct contrast to her husband) any furrowing of her brow. In contrast to his exaggerated expression, hers is on the edge of not being an expression at all; she is shooting him an unmistakably dirty look, and yet the differences between this look and a neutrally inexpressive glance are subtle. This contrast contributes both to the eloquence of the moment in expressing their relationship and to its comedy. A novel could of course explore such a pair of expressions, such a moment, in great detail and with great power, but to do so would require the reader to spend a period of time reading about the moment described that greatly exceeded the fictional duration of that moment itself. The sparseness of Meloy's prose has its own strengths, but our highly developed ability to interpret the facial expressions of other human beings means that only in the film can the moment in question be expressed with such nuance and detail, and yet still be represented *as a moment*. In his 1921 book *La Poésie d'aujourd'hui, un nouvel état d'intelligence*, the twenty-three year old Jean Epstein compared film with modern literature, and claimed that although film was an 'emerging, still-hesitant mode of expression', it 'nonetheless stands as the most subtle one we have ever known, the most attuned to the moment' ([1921] 2012: 271). Film may have long since 'emerged', but its attunement to the moment remains undiminished, as this particular moment helps to illustrate.

## II.

Critics routinely connect Reichardt's films to an aesthetic of the long take, and indeed she does make a powerful and distinctive use of long takes (perhaps most obviously in *Certain Women* during the scene in the film's third segment in which the rancher [Lily Gladstone] drives away from her final brave but disappointing and embarrassing encounter with Elizabeth [Kristen Stewart]). The sequence from which our moment comes involves three characters in a single room and could easily have been filmed in a single take. Instead, Reichardt – who edited *Certain Women* herself – uses different editing practices to move in and out of subtly different narrational modes (she once remarked that 'the language of the film is outside the dialogue. It's where the cut is' [cited in Holmlund 2016: 265]). Close attention to the way that this sequence is edited will clarify our sense of the way that editing can serve both to isolate moments of a film, precisely *as* moments, and also to connect them with, or embed them within, the wider film of which they are a part.

Visually, there are three distinct groupings of characters used in this scene. Sometimes we can see all three characters simultaneously; at other times we see Gina and Ryan together and Albert separately; and at still other times all three characters are seen separately. After Albert comes to the door and invites Gina and Ryan in, we see the three characters together in a single take; a mobile camera follows them as they cross the room to sit down. This take ends by framing Gina and Ryan together on a sofa, establishing them as a unit distinct from their host, Albert. There then follows a shot / reverse-shot sequence between Albert (seen in one-shot) and the two-shot of the couple on the sofa. During the last two-shot in this sequence Albert stands up and moves into view. The camera moves so that we see the couple from behind the sofa; Gina's face is visible but we can only see the back of Ryan's head, as Gina stage-whispers to Ryan her response to Albert's story of having had a fall ('Poor Albert!'). Gina gets up to look out of the window, and we see her view, including her reflection in the window and some of the crucial sandstone. When Albert returns and sits down again, Gina asks about the stone for the first time (something we know her to feel to

be an imposition, since she earlier asked Ryan to be the one to broach the subject; presumably he felt that this request was itself an imposition on him). Gina's request, which clumsily and transparently attempts to pretend that her aims align with Albert's ('Albert, so we were wondering about the sandstone in the front yard, and if you'd be willing to sell it to us. I mean, if you wanted to get rid of it we ... we'd take it off your hands.') is seen from the same behind-the-sofa setup as before, but when we cut to Albert listening to her, we have entered an extended series of one-shots of each of the three characters, mostly filmed from fixed camera positions, that eventually ends with a return to the two-shot of the couple on the sofa, after Albert's question 'When do you need it?'

The scene thus moves, gently and unobtrusively but rigorously, from visually representing all three characters as some kind of group, to setting the couple off against Albert, and finally to isolating them as three distinct individuals. We move, that is to say, from a 'three', to a 'two plus one', and eventually

to 'three ones', after which the pattern is reversed with a return to the two-shot of the couple and one-shots of Albert after which, as Gina and Ryan leave, we once more, albeit briefly, see all three characters together in a single frame. This editing strategy emphasises the complexity of the three-way conversation that is going on here. Its symmetry also serves to increase the scene's intensity as it approaches its denouement, and then elegantly diffuse the tension somewhat as the scene draws to a close. As the scene progresses, the editing and framing gradually isolate the characters further from one another, making us reconstruct their various relationships in our minds, as the film increasingly denies us the chance to see both action and reaction simultaneously (although at times we do hear one character and see another). The scene's range of intricately ironic patterns concerning what the characters (with varying degrees of self-awareness and self-consciousness) assume about each other, and assume that the other is assuming about them, are thereby emphasised. I have already discussed Gina

and Ryan's different attitudes to the accomplishment of Gina's plan. Albert, for his part, gives something of a *performance* of a confused old man, responding with what might appear to be non-sequiturs (about getting someone called Kyle to help build the house, for example); it later becomes clear that he was thinking hard about the sandstone all along. The differing priorities of the differing characters are often expressed in patterns of listening and not listening. For example, it is clear from the play of the muscles around her mouth that Gina's delight about Albert's acquiescence concerning the stone (a delight which she is attempting somewhat to repress, to avoid breaking into a grin) is distracting her from, even making her impatient with, Albert's story about the origin of the stone (it was formerly the old schoolhouse) – and this despite her professed interest in authenticity. Albert, for his part, has no interest in Gina's expressions of interest in authentic materials, and cuts right across her – 'edits' her dialogue himself – to announce that the stone was already there when, in 1966, he and his now dead brother built the house in which he still lives, but which remains unfinished; it lacks a back porch, for example. (It is worth noting that Albert tends very much to direct his remarks and his questions towards Ryan, not Gina, thereby hinting at a generationally conditioned misogyny, or at least discomfort around women. The film is delicate enough to suggest this without upsetting the balance of the scene, in which it is Gina's ethical shortcomings with respect to Albert that are most at issue.)<sup>3</sup> Albert states that since he is now seventy-six he is unlikely ever to finish the house. Giving up the stone, therefore, represents the evaporation of a scheme that Albert has had for half a century, the surrender of the unrealistic but comforting belief that it might one day still be enacted. (It is not clear that Albert actually intended to use the stone as part of his own house, but it still serves as a reminder of unfulfilled plans that are now, he admits to himself, unfulfillable.)

It is in the context of all this that Gina's glare at Ryan takes place. The look is just starting to form on her face as we hear Ryan begin to say that Albert does not have to sell the stone; we then cut to Ryan, who – as we have already seen – grins ingratiatingly at Gina after making his remark. Reichardt then cuts back to Gina's dirty look, which barely changes across a



two-second shot after which we cut to Albert, asking rather curtly, 'When do you need it?' The editing thus isolates Gina's expression so as almost to epitomise it, and in so doing corroborates Jean Epstein's sense that '[o]n the screen, the essential quality of a gesture is that it does not come to an end' ([1921] 2012: 273). It is as if the editing separates the gesture so that we can imagine it lasting forever; we do not see it come into being or pass away, so that this one moment is crystallised in our memory. But this isolation does not *remove* it from its narrative context; on the contrary, it *intensifies* its relation to this context, enriches this moment and what it encapsulates about the relationships at play and their shifting dynamics.

### III.

One could, in fact, describe the editing (and generally the rhetoric) at this point in the film as broadly classical, in that their effects seem intended to be largely subliminal, or at the very least are not foregrounded; the editing does not call attention to itself in 'modernist' fashion.<sup>4</sup> The narration is also classical in its concentration on plausibly real human beings, their interactions and motivations; there may be ellipses in the narrative, but these are all relatively easily filled, and do not generate the kind of aesthetic and epistemological dilemmas we find in the canonical examples of modernist cinema. But there is something of a puzzle in the critical reaction to Reichardt's work, in that this classicism is underplayed; the films tend instead to be received as instances of modern American realist art cinema, with the focus put on the relations – and tensions – between their realism and their status as high art. E. Dawn Hall, for example, states unambiguously that Reichardt 'rejects mainstream form' (2018: 143). Elena Gorfinkel, for her part, argues that 'Reichardt's autonomous creative practice and relatively low budgets have linked her style with international art cinema, both historical (neorealism) and contemporary (slow cinema)' and that she makes the kind of 'slow films [that] evacuate eventfulness, in the pursuit of dedramatised scenarios in which incident replaces event, and sheer profilmic happening challenges structures of legible or discrete causality' (2016: 123 & 124). There is certainly an initial plausibility to this account in relation

to much of Reichardt's work, and particularly as applied to the film Gorfinkel concentrates on, *Meek's Cutoff* (2010), her reading of which I find broadly persuasive. The danger, however, is that, precisely because *Certain Women* is unlikely to strike anyone familiar with Reichardt's films as a radical stylistic departure, one might – if one isn't careful – assume that such an interpretation of her aesthetics is equally applicable here.<sup>5</sup> But – to take one example – does the rancher's labour in *Certain Women* seem to relate to 'the linkage of quotidian activity and forms of arduous, painful labour with temporalities of exhaustion and dispossession for subjects on the margins of American life' (Gorfinkel 2016: 124-5)? The answer can at most be a qualified 'yes and no'. The rancher is certainly, from any standard perspective, 'on the margins of American life', but it is also made clear that she enjoys and, at least to a degree, fulfils herself in such labour; she has spent time with horses, for pleasure, since she was a girl. *Certain Women* often facilitates our understanding of character by means of, and in relation to, action in ways that indicate that Reichardt's style is more amenable to an at least relatively classical treatment of cinematic narration than accounts such as Hall's and Gorfinkel's might lead us to expect.

Certainly, motivation is unclear at various points in *Certain Women* (both to the audience and to the characters themselves), but this is not quite the same thing as a challenge to 'structures of legible or discrete causality'. When we first meet Gina she is on a run near to the site of the planned house in the country, but she is also smoking. The way that she buries her cigarette after finishing it and later sucks on a

breath mint indicate that she is hiding her smoking from her family. It would be reasonable to assume that they know her once to have smoked, and so that what she is concealing is a failure to see a plan through, namely to quit smoking and stay quit. After running through the lion's share of its three narratives one after another, *Certain Women* concludes by returning briefly to each narrative, in the same order as they first appeared. When we return to Gina and Ryan, they are having a lunch party with friends at the site of their projected new house. When we last see Gina, she is sitting with a glass of wine, smoking openly, after which the film leaves this narrative thread for the last time with a shot of the sandstone, now piled up near the site of the future house, at which Gina is gazing. It is unclear whether this is better read as an image of acceptance (Gina has come to terms with herself, and part of that self involves being a smoker) or resignation (she has simply given up trying to pretend that she is different from how she actually is).<sup>6</sup> Does the neat pile of sandstone – as opposed to the shapeless piles that lay outside Albert's house – represent the next stage on the way to the house, the midway point of a plan that is being fruitfully exercised, or will this pile still lie here decades from now, as Albert's did? All these possibilities are in play, but expressed in this way as mutually exclusive options they are too crude; the answer lies somewhere between them, or in their mutual plausibility.

We gain the most insight into Gina's character, I believe, if we see something like these possibilities as also available to her, as possibilities. She may not know quite why she is so determined to build the house, but the tautness, toughness, and defensiveness that characterises her earlier in the film (see the way she tends to fold her arms across her chest) has somewhat diminished; it seems she has, at the very least, developed a flexibility that may help her to be more relaxed about not knowing, at every moment, exactly what she wants and how to get it. Just as was the case when we were first introduced to her, our last glimpse of Gina is accompanied by the sound of quail asking, as we have learned from Albert, 'How are you?' The response – 'I'm just fine' – is pointedly missing. The resonance of this is complicated, however, by the fact that we have seen that both Albert and Gina are familiar with this piece of folklore, and thus it forms the only real connection between





the two of them; looking at the sandstone and listening to the quail Gina may well be thinking of Albert as much as of herself, and thus could be said – in a more straightforward reading of the character's 'journey' – to have learned a lesson about selfishness and empathy (and their relation to self-acceptance) that she seemed, earlier, to be very much in need of.

*Certain Women* is (like all narrative films) a film about moments and their connections; the two main ways moments can be connected are as patterns or – if those patterns represent the way in which a goal may be achieved – as plans. A number of characters in the film have what we might call an impulse to a scheme, the feeling of having a plan, but not actually anything close to a fully worked-out plan. The two crucial instances of this bookend Gina's narrative; they are Fuller's (Jared Harris) hostage situation in the first segment and the rancher's trip to Livingston in the third. Both of these seem to me to be instances of activities directed towards goals (Fuller wants to get his insurance money; the rancher wants to see

Elizabeth again; these desires are what motivate their actions) without quite being *plans*, because plans need to involve a sense of how exactly the actions will bring about the goal. Both Fuller and the rancher, however, select actions where the need simply to take the next step precludes any genuine planning or reflecting. (The hostage situation descends into a ludicrous attempt to escape from the police, while the rancher's need simply to *find* Elizabeth allows her to avoid spending any time thinking about what exactly she will do when she does find her.) Gina's situation is a little different because it does involve making detailed plans for her house – but this in itself turns out to be something of an evasion, distracting her from, for example, really dealing with her relationships with her husband and daughter.

It may of course turn out that we are able to discover what our plans 'really' are only by embarking on them, even if we are incapable of formulating them in a completely lucid fashion. Robert Pippin articulates this kind of possibility in explaining

the sense of agency that he finds in Nietzsche (among other philosophers):

I may start out engaged in a project, understand my intention as X, and over time, come to understand that this first characterization was not really an accurate or a full description of what I intended; it must have been Y, or later perhaps Z. And there is no way to confirm the certainty of one's 'real' purpose except *in* the deed actually performed. (2010: 78)

I think something like this is true of Fuller's intentions with regard to his hostage-taking, and what he comes to realise about them later in prison, though I do not have space to explore that aspect of the film here. One could also argue that *Certain Women* exhibits a rather Hegelian attitude to agency, along the lines described by Terry Pinkard, according to which:

*we come to be* the kinds of agents we are; we *actualize* certain self-interpretations in the ways we carry them out in practice, and this 'negative' stance toward ourselves – of our never being just what we are, except insofar as we interpret ourselves as being that type of agent and sustain that type of interpretation – inflicts a kind of 'wound,' a *Zerissenheit*, a manner of being internally torn apart that demands healing. (2007: 5)

To be an agent both interpretation and action are crucial; it is not that we simply have to interpret correctly or can choose action *instead of* interpretation. Neither, of course, is it the case that we have some kind of abstract 'true self' that we simply have to discover, but nor are we free to be whoever we want to be, because becoming 'the kinds of agents we are' is a practical matter, and also involves who others take us to be. Pinkard goes on to argue that for Hegel 'the status of "being an agent" is not a metaphysical or empirical fact about us; it is a socially conferred, normative *status*, and becoming an agent is to be construed as an achievement, not as a metaphysical or empirical property we suddenly come to possess' (7). According to this way of thinking, then, who we are involves at least three things – who we *think* we are, what *we do*, and who *others* think we are, and none of these three factors can be discarded or simply equated with who we 'really' are. (It wouldn't make sense, for example, to say that who we are is only a matter of what we do, because we only do what we do



because of who we think we are.) One key distinction concerns those situations in which acting is a way of *avoiding* confronting 'what we are', and those in which it is a way of *accepting or becoming* who we are; the former just attempts to conceal or deny Hegel's 'wound', while the latter attempts to come to terms with it, if not necessarily actually to heal it. The rancher's drive to Livingstone is intriguing because it seems at one and the same time to be both a means of avoidance (we might think of her purposeless wandering and looking in shop windows as a way of avoiding the difficult cognitive activity of self-interpretation) and of becoming (because it is a proactive attempt to achieve something, even if it deliberately does not ask how exactly it will achieve this).

I hope it is clear that my discussion above of the last glimpse that the film gives us of Gina could also be explored in these terms. Gina's scheme to get the stone represents, it seems, one of the most worked-out plans in the film. If so, the crucial thing is that Albert sees right through it. Gina's plan has been predicated on telling herself that she (and her plan) have his best interests at heart (what use could Albert possibly have for the stone?), all the time, of course, knowing at least at some level that this is not true. Her commitment to authenticity is not itself authentic, or at least not fully so. This may in fact be where some of the venom behind her dirty look comes from; it can be painful to be confronted with the gap between one's intentions and what one has been telling oneself about them. When she and Ryan take their leave, Gina says to Albert: 'no more falling down', to which he replies: 'I don't plan to'. This is of course a joke, but how exactly does it work? It once again shows up Gina; her statement takes the form of a fairly familiar idiom in which a wish ('I hope you don't fall down') is expressed in the form of a mock-admonishment, as if Albert was responsible for falling over. It is perhaps a little cruel (or at least unsporting) of Albert not to play along with this idiom's game, but also entirely reasonable, because Gina is assuming an intimacy and a mutual understanding that is not merited; she is not, for example, actually promising to help, should he fall over again. Albert's statement is also, of course, literally true (he doesn't plan to fall over), which serves merely to underline that this makes no difference to the likelihood of

it happening again; nobody's future can be entirely a matter of planning.

The relationship between agency and intersubjectivity in *Certain Women* is frequently expressed in terms of small promises that are broken.<sup>7</sup> Laura promises Fuller to tell the police he's got a gun so that he will have time to escape, but immediately tells them he is unarmed; we also learn later that she has promised to write to him in prison but has not done so. Gina and Ryan break their promise to their daughter to go home straightaway by visiting Albert to ask about the stone, and Elizabeth breaks some kind of implicit promise in not telling the rancher that she's given up teaching the night class. It turns out that, just as sometimes one simply finds oneself acting without a detailed plan, sometimes it is best if such promises are simply kept, without any complicated reasoning behind them; Fuller tells Laura that it doesn't matter if she

has nothing to say, it's best just to write ('It doesn't have to be a tome').

Authenticity, then, doesn't seem to require elaborate planning. This is something that Gina might seem to come to understand, but to say that is not to say that she experiences any kind of dramatic moment of self-revelation; driving away from Albert's house, she still says to Ryan: 'I thought he knew he wasn't gonna use it' (which is of course what she *wanted* to think). She doesn't want to give it back, though: 'Someone else will just take it' (which still sounds like a self-justifying excuse). Thus: 'We just have to think of something really good to do with it; then it won't feel so sad to take it.' When they return to collect the stone, Gina waves at Albert and he – rather pointedly – does not wave back. It might, then, be possible to read Gina's final act of staring at the stone as her attempting to think of just such a thing ('something really





good to do with it'), but the degree of relaxation that finally appears on her face at this point – the absence of either triumph or determination in her expression – seems to me to be a hint that something about Gina's attitudes to plans (which is to say something about the kind of agent she is), rather than just her plans themselves, has changed or is in the process of changing. Perhaps the real importance of the plan to build a house was simply to have a plan, to occupy, distract, and drive herself. That plan has not necessarily been abandoned but it is the prospect of the house itself, rather than the plan to build one, that is – just – beginning to come alive, and in the process Gina is becoming more authentically who she is.<sup>8</sup>

#### IV.

Although I have argued that, in *Certain Women* at least, there is an under-recognised classicism in Reichardt's work, I have also been arguing that *Certain Women* might be said rather to undercut, or at the very least to complicate, the notions of the centrality to classical narration of goal-directed action most famously expressed by the likes of David Bordwell because, in Reichardt's film, desires and actions are not straightforwardly connected. Thus, the conclusion of Gina's narrative could be described as something of an 'open' ending, but it does not seem to me primarily directed at, say, a demonstration of the artificiality of narrative closure, or even the need for every viewer to contribute their own interpretation of what is shown; its openness tells us something about its protagonist. Characters can, as I think is the case here, be clear *that* they want something, or want to do something, but not entirely clear *why*. (Drawing on Stanley Cavell's observation that 'Hildy, in *His Girl Friday*, does not know why she has come back to see Walter' [1981: 163], Alex Clayton deftly teases out some of the crucial subtleties that can be obscured by thinking too rigidly in terms of characters' goals, even in the most classical of instances [2011: 32-37]; Robert Pippin has expertly explored related questions in another set of films that at least border on classical narration [2012].) Beyond this, I want to claim that there is a certain kind of reflexivity in *Certain Women* between the schemes of the film's characters, and what I suggested at the beginning of this article that

we might call the film's own schemes. But for all this, however, it is not a particularly – certainly not an aggressively – 'modernist' reflexivity.

We might find this reflexivity, in the first place, in the film's title (which comes from Reichardt, not Meloy). The film concerns 'certain' women: not just any old women, not extraordinarily unusual women, just a *particular* choice of individual women. But the irony is that in many ways these women are not that 'certain', in the sense of being clear and confident about themselves and their purposes. Or, rather, what certainty they have is – in each of the three narratives – somehow challenged and complicated by the ensuing events. In order for us to understand this – in order for the characters' actions and decisions to be comprehensible and interpretable – the film requires a certain realism, or naturalism, or perhaps neorealism. For Katherine Fusco and Nicole Seymour, in their book-length study of Reichardt's films,

Reichardt updates neorealism with a relentless antisentimentality, retaining its 'revolutionary humanism' (Bazin, 'Cinematic Realism', 33) even as she alienates viewers from her characters through a focus on either unlikable or opaque protagonists. By making her characters less lovable than their neorealist predecessors, Reichardt draws attention to contemporary society's unwillingness to care for those with whom it may be difficult to identify. (2017: 23)

*Certain Women* was only released as Fusco and Seymour were completing their manuscript, and thus does not receive extended discussion. But it is easy to see Gina as another example of a somewhat opaque and certainly potentially unlikable protagonist. (Hall argues that this aspect of the character is intensified in the film, that she receives 'a more sympathetic characterization in Meloy's story than Reichardt allows on screen' [2018: 137].)

The second sentence from Fusco and Seymour cited above seems to claim an allegorical purpose to Reichardt's films; the way the films challenge the viewer's ability to empathise with their protagonists allegorizes 'contemporary society's unwillingness to care for those with whom it may be difficult to identify'. As with Gorfinkel's claims about 'sheer profilmic happening' I find such a reading potentially fruitful, but I would also argue that it would be unhelpful and distorting were it to

be taken as recommending certain interpretational strategies to the exclusion of others. Thus, if we find it hard to identify or sympathise with certain characters in these films, that may well raise wider social questions about 'care'; but we should by no means merely take it as given that these characters *are*, for all viewers, 'either unlikable or opaque'. Nor am I at all sure that *relentless* antisentimentality is the right description of Reichardt's work, and certainly not of *Certain Women* (see, for example, the character of Fuller, the clear injustice he has suffered and the way that his skill at carpentry is emphasised, or the way he extols the pleasures of getting a letter – any letter – while in prison). If one is open to them there are a rather large number of touching, bittersweet moments in the film. It is certainly true (some of the undergraduates to whom I have taught the film could serve as proof) that some viewers find the characters difficult to empathise and identify with, but it seems to me more that the film's challenge is for audiences to move beyond this and find things to like – even to love – in these characters, a challenge which certainly renders the film vulnerable should one *not* manage to do this.

As well as their 'naturalism', however, Reichardt's films are also carefully, and highly, patterned; we have seen this in the rigour of the editing patterns during Gina and Ryan's visit to Albert. To give one more example: there is a motif that appears in both the first and third narrative segments in which an important character arrives in a car, seen out of focus in the background of an image with a shallow depth of field. We thus *feel* that someone is approaching before we really *notice* that it happens; our noticing thus somehow emerges gradually rather than abruptly intruding. And the simple fact of the pattern itself, of course, invites comparison between the two moments. Reichardt herself has observed that:

I get lumped in with this 'neorealism' a lot, often with a lot of films that feel more 'flimsy' or experiential to me. I feel like my films are different, more structured. But it's all treated the same. And maybe it is! Maybe it's all realism. [...]. I try not to follow the dialogue around and try to be as sparse as possible and rely on the filmmaking as much as possible. (interview in Fusco and Seymour 2017: 114)

So, as I suggested earlier, there seems a question as to whether or not 'realism' is somehow in tension with a 'more structured'

form of filmmaking. In a straightforward sense, we could easily observe that realism (and particularly Reichardt's brand of it) is likely to seem less realistic if it is too obviously wrought, because such operations would be likely to be distracting. Hence, presumably, Reichardt's desire to 'try to be as sparse as possible', to minimise distractions.

Beyond this, however, it might seem as though a certain kind, at least, of 'realism' is fundamentally at odds with a certain mode of expressing meaning through formal patterning – the more pattern, the less realism, perhaps. I would want to dispute any such claim. It is only by entering imaginatively 'into' the film that we will fully be able to comprehend its 'schemes'; we do not first understand its story and *then* appreciate how that story is 'artistically' arranged. It certainly seems plausible to say that diegetic schemes (Gina's plan for her house) are connected, by a kind of reflexivity, with the broader aesthetic schemes of the film in which they are represented. This kind of relationship is also achieved with a degree of irony. When Fuller is weeping self-pityingly in Laura's car, we hear on her car radio the song 'Boats to Build' (performed by Jimmy Buffett, written by Guy Clark and Verlon Thompson), which refers to achieving 'a fair curve from a noble plan'. Is the film's conclusion that we don't need 'noble plans'? That 'fair curves' and 'nobility' are achievable by other means? Or perhaps that plans are not quite what we thought them to be, that there is not a zero-sum game between fully working out a plan in detail and acting without thinking? (This might be one reason why we can learn things, not only about our desires, but also about our plans, by acting 'thoughtlessly'.)

It is one of the many extremely impressive accomplishments of *Certain Women* that in it Reichardt achieves a harmony between form and content where the former does not exactly mimic the latter (for this to be the case the film would probably have to – like Fuller and the rancher – exhibit a gap between its goals and its plans for achieving them, but it is much too meticulously structured and delicately balanced for that kind of gambit); nor is the form always directly at the service of expressing the content. But would it be quite right to claim, then, that the characters' schemes in *Certain Women* reflexively serve the film's artistic/narrative schemes? If anything, I suggest that it is the other way around. A focus on



character does not entail a naïveté in which we think characters are real people. It has, instead, a subjunctive quality – it is 'as if' characters are people. And reading in this way – for those films that respond to such a reading – can be a way of maximising interpretive richness, drawing on as much of our wider experience as is relevant and helpful while still remaining acutely sensitive to every aspect of a text, whether that be the rhythm of the editing or the emotional expression of a character. In *Certain Women*, the film's artistic 'schemes' are directed at exploring the human schemes exemplified by the characters in the film. These explorations of human scheming take a particularly vivid form at certain moments, a form whose sharpness is assisted, not hindered, by the wider aesthetic schemes to which these moments contribute. As viewers, we come to understand and engage with *Certain Women's* exploration of human agency and subjectivity by tracing the 'curves' – the form – of the film and the actions

of its characters in relation to the 'plans' – whether 'noble' or otherwise – both of these characters and of the film as a whole.

#### DOMINIC LASH

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1 In talking about 'the film's schemes' I mean something along the lines of Stanley Cavell's recommendation: 'Don't ask what the artist is thinking or intending, but ask why the work is as it is, why just this is here in just that way. [...] My formulation employing the work's thinking or intending or wanting something, is meant to emphasise the sense that the work wants something of us who behold or hear or read it.' (Cavell & Klevan 2005: 186) Also relevant to my practice here is the discussion between Cavell and Klevan about criticism that begins from the critic's response to a specific moment (180-2).

2 Having said this, it is also certainly possible that at some level – probably related to the affair that he has been conducting, as I discuss below – Ryan would not be sorry to be free of the obligation to continue pursuing Gina's plans for the house. His remark to Albert, that is, might be an attempt to have it both ways.

3 Gina's confidence and assertiveness would, of course, be deemed threatening by some men. (Does Albert perhaps think Ryan is emasculated by working for his own wife?) *Certain Women* explores the relationship between the qualities of confidence and assertiveness, and aspects of their gendering, throughout. In the first segment Fuller's assertiveness masks his lack of confidence, exasperating Laura despite her sympathy for him. In the third segment the rancher's particular kind of confidence is expressed via an absence of assertiveness, which is set off against Elisabeth's different blend of these qualities; this relationship is also given other dimensions by the fact that in this case both parties are female, something that is Reichardt's own contribution (in Meloy's source story, the rancher is male).

4 In saying this I wish to claim that the editing is largely aimed at the effects at which classical editing aims, not that it uses a strictly classical style. Just as this scene avoids long takes, it also avoids using master shots and insert close-ups, which would have been a more classical way of proceeding. At points, too, the editing is very delicately balanced. After Gina first asks Albert about the sandstone, the film keeps his rather blank expression on screen for slightly longer than we might expect, after which it cuts back to Gina, who is still grinning; only then does her face begin to fall. It is not clear to me if this is best described as a 'non-classical' attempt slightly to stretch time (would a more classical editing style have cut back to Gina with her face already fallen?), or as a wholly 'classical' method of representing quite how long Gina attempts to keep smiling, willing Albert to agree to her request. Thanks to Polly Rose for discussions on this point.

5 Though I will not pursue this argument here, I would in fact be inclined to suggest that, if anything, it is *Meek's Cutoff* rather than *Certain Women* that is something of an anomaly in Reichardt's oeuvre.

6 Hall appears to have a more straightforward reading of this moment – 'the sun is shining, the family is surrounded by friends and possibly family, and Gina seems to crack a genuine smile' (2018: 137) – but even here 'seems' works against 'genuine' to imply further complexity that needs accounting for.

7 The film also gestures at a connection between promises among people and promise as what the future might offer (as that towards which plans are directed?). Before the rancher drives into town and first visits the night school, her television says: 'It's a mysterious realm, full of danger and full of promise.'

8 The source text is itself rather ambiguous on this point. Although we are told that Susan 'constructed the house [...] the stone turning corners and supporting ceilings in her minds', she does this only '[w]ith effort', after initially finding that 'she couldn't picture the stone as part of a building, only as freestanding monuments on their undeveloped lot, upright versions of the ruin in Albert's yard' (Meloy 2005: 39).